The Participation Forum*

July 21, 1994

Topic: Improving Technical Rigor Through Participation

How can participation improve the technical rigor of the work that we do as development professionals? What can the views of ordinary citizens bring to decisions and processes that require a lot of technical understanding? What happens when we ignore those views? At the sixth session of the Participation Forum, two presenters highly credentialed in the hard sciences addressed these questions. Keith Pittman, a water specialist at the World Bank, discussed massive flood control efforts in Bangladesh, where he was until recently the chief of party for the USAID-funded Irrigation Support Project for Asia and the Near East (ISPAN) in Bangladesh. Gene Brantly, Technical Director for Risk Assessment for the Environmental Health Project, described how a health risk assessment in Quito, Ecuador, employed participatory methods to get a more accurate picture of reality. The Forum was introduced by John Hicks, Assistant Administrator for the Bureau for Africa, and Glenn Prickett, Senior Policy Advisor on the Environment, moderated the discussion. -- Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development.

Participation Successes and Failures in Africa *John Hicks*

The issue of participation is high on the agenda of the Africa Bureau--partly because of the head start that the Development Fund for Africa gave us. As we craft our strategies and programs, we think of the people in the governments, institutions, and organizations in Africa as partners, with whom we jointly develop programs, not as beneficiaries. We try to devise creative ways in which Africans can lead in the development, design, and implementation of programs. I'd like to cite two examples of how ordinary people can be engaged in development interventions--one from the Gambia and the other from Zimbabwe.

In Gambia, a national environmental action plan was developed through a participatory process involving representatives of all strata of Gambia's society, the government, and the donors. USAID agreed to support the program with the condition that the government sign agreements with local communities giving them the right to manage their resources if they developed plans for the sustainable use of those resources. Once these agreements are signed, the communities have the right to request technical assistance in areas such as increasing soil fertility or enhancing forest or range resources. Because the technicians

---

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or INTERNET, as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

work for the communities rather than vice versa, community knowledge of the resources is taken into account.

My anecdote about Zimbabwe has to do with USAID efforts in family planning. I was deputy mission director in Zimbabwe as we were trying to define our population program. When Zimbabwe emerged from independence in 1980, family planning was a sensitive issue. During the civil war, the revolutionary factions in Zimbabwe, as part of their propaganda campaign, accused the Rhodesian government of promoting family planning to commit genocide against the Zimbabwean people. At the same time the country was facing a 3.3 percent population growth rate; population obviously needed to be addressed from a developmental point of view.

Without a full understanding of the sensitivities of Zimbabweans, USAID developed a family planning program in collaboration with the National Family Planning Council, an institution that dated from the colonial period. The program was technically but not sociologically sound. USAID did not put forth the type of effort needed to engage the local people--in this case, the women's wings of the various liberation groups and the members of the majority community in the rural areas. In fact, we had designed a project that we could not negotiate and implement with the new government of Zimbabwe.

So what did we do? We backtracked. We built linkages with the new government. We built a relationship with the women's wings and then reached out to the local communities. In about a year, we redesigned the family planning program. It was a program that emerged from the Zimbabweans with our technical support, and it was implemented very successfully.

Striving for Participation in the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan *Keith Pittman*

Major Problems, Major Impacts. Major water-sector investment started in East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. About $2 to $4 billion has been invested to cover about 3.6 million hectares of land with flood-control and drainage projects and about 200,000 hectares with irrigation projects. Currently 1.6 million people are affected by major irrigation projects--basically dams that divert water from rivers onto the land rather like, say, the Salt River Project. And approximately 24 million people live within the boundaries of the flood-control and drainage projects. Planned expansion between 1990 and 1995 will probably increase that to about 30 million people.

A Program Designed for Pakistan, Not Bangladesh. Up to 1991, all public-sector water projects were driven by a master plan developed in 1964. In terms of people's participation in Bangladesh, it's very important to know that all of the technical expertise that directed planning in Bangladesh came from Pakistan. This approach to development was centrally driven and planned. Also it assumed that Bangladesh was like Pakistan. In a sense, the projects were designed inappropriately for Bangladesh. All the administrators and technicians had been trained primarily in Pakistan and were not able to adjust to the reality of Bangladesh.

Another problem arose from the military orientation of the Pakistani administration. Information was controlled in a military way. For example, maps were restricted. Field engineers had to go to Dacca, make a tracing of a map, and then go back to the project. They concentrated on the site where the structures were being built because they were design engineers. They didn't worry too much about the area of the project, nor did they ask the local people what they thought about the project. They went back to Dacca, perhaps even to Karachi in the early days, redesigned the projects, and then started building them.

When USAID, through the Irrigation Support Program for Asia and the Near East (ISPAN), began work in Bangladesh, we inherited a system in which there was no participation at all.

Operational Problems Caused by Lack of Participation. Lack of participation gave rise to conflicts between farmers, fisherman, and tradesmen, all of whom have different interests in the project areas.

"Public cuts" are one operational problem. A project may consist of an embankment 10 to 15 feet high encompassing an area. The water on the outside rises quite quickly during the monsoon period, which is between June and October. When people perceive a local threat to the embankment and worry about

its giving way, they sometimes cut it from the inside. They'd rather have the water come in in a controlled way than to wait for it to go over the top. Also, the people on the outside of the project mistakenly think that by cutting the project boundary, they can lower the floodwater on the outside, but, of course, this is impossible with such a huge river. The public needs education about the purpose of these projects.

Operation and maintenance are also affected by lack of participation. Because there's no local ownership of the projects, they're regarded as imposed upon the landscape by the central government. People work on the projects for about six months during the time of construction, and that's all they know about them. The structures quickly dry up, wash out, or silt up because there's no local involvement in their maintenance. Thus the projects tend to run down and fail.

Out of the 3.6 million hectares of land covered with flood control and drainage projects that I mentioned earlier, only about 25 percent is effective. At a cost of between $2 and $4 billion, it's mighty expensive in terms of cost per hectare of development. And, cost recovery is minimal. People don't see themselves as beneficiaries of these projects and consequently are unwilling to pay any service fees. The collection rate is only 2 to 5 percent.

Changing a Dismal Inherited System. The Bangladesh Flood Action Plan, which started in 1990, is a $160 million effort, with 265 projects. Fifteen donors are involved. It consisted of a new strategy for controlling floods in Bangladesh.

Many people, particularly in the government, felt that the Flood Action Plan was a new opportunity to revamp the 1964 master plan and build yet more mega public-sector projects so that the government could regain control from what they saw as the unfortunate effects of privatization of minor irrigation, which has proved to be very successful. However, the donors realized that the only way that this plan was going to make any difference to the future of Bangladesh, given the history that you just heard, was to argue for people's participation in project preparation and design. The 15 development partners voiced a long sustained argument for transparency at the macro level of planning in the central government directed at the government and the Flood-Plan Coordination Organization.

ISPAN was deeply involved in trying to get the government to account for what was going on. Projects with a potential price tag of $5 to $10 billion were being planned by the government, and many felt that these were being imposed upon the country by President Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime, which fell at the end of 1990. Many regarded this as an undemocratic plan that foisted upon the people of Bangladesh a huge debt to pay off over the next 40 years.

In a slightly more rational way, others argued that the country needed some control over water so that it could maximize its development opportunities, and therefore it was necessary to work with the government. They wanted to make the plan democratic.

This was the line of argument adopted by local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As participants in this debate, they wrote several pamphlets that were circulated widely in Bangladesh and internationally. Using their incredible network, which is linked with the U.S. NGO network, they made the government listen, although the government regards them as very irritating. As a result of the debates, the plan has gradually changed from a structurally oriented plan in 1990 to a plan with more emphasis on the environment and people's participation.

In reaction to many of the criticisms, special components for people's participation were built into the Flood Action Plan. The FAB 20 Compartmentalization Pilot Project consists of 20 to 25 big structures to regulate the water through the area, taking into account the needs for fisheries, navigation, and also farming. It's the first time a multidisciplinary approach has been adopted for a project in Bangladesh. Guidelines for people's participation were produced and accepted by the government of Bangladesh.

Last week, during a consultation on the Flood Action Plan in London, ISPAN representatives asked some questions about people's participation. The government was talking about enacting a law to ensure people's participation. It was as if the government were saying, "We will set up a committee headed by so-and-so who will tell you to participate." We almost fell off our chairs when the conference secretary responded to the idea of a participation law by saying, "We've decided that if participation is going to work, it has to be voluntary. We cannot mandate participation." So they've learned something, rather wonderfully.

National Seminars. Originally Flood Action Plan projects went through a review process assisted by an international panel of experts. Once approved, the projects went back to the Bangladesh Water Development Board for implementation. Now the process is more complex but also more effective. A process of consultation with field visits produces a preliminary plan, or blue line, that is processed by the Flood-Plan Coordination Organization. The plan is collated and pushed out as a series of pamphlets and briefing notes for regional presentations. Local conferences are held in regional centers with two levels of consultation. One is with the local members of Parliament and local officials, and the second level is with local people looking at the plans on the spot. This then feeds back into the review process. Another difference is that national seminars are held on the proposals coming out of this national planning process. In other words, the government doesn't say, "We are going to do it." It now says, "We wish to do it. What do you think about it?"These seminars are not as participative as one would like, because the government of Bangladesh is not comfortable with democratic institutions. Three national conferences have been held on the Flood Action Plan. The first, in 1990, was attended by civil servants only behind closed doors. Thirty-five people were almost locked in the room and weren't allowed to talk about what went on during the meeting. The minutes were circulated privately and were confidential. USAID and ISPAN worked very hard to make the second conference in 1992 more transparent. We argued very strongly that if they were serious about participation, they had to open the conference up to more people. In consequence, over 600 participants turned up from all walks of life--politicians, journalists, academics. At our urging they also published the proceedings and made them widely available. The third conference, in 1993, was organized by the government itself with USAID financing much of the participation process. The government said, "Fine. You've shown us how to do it. We'll do it ourselves." The result was a bit disappointing. For example, they wouldn't allow questions from the floor. People had to write their questions down and hand them over to the chief engineer who simply ignored the questions he couldn't understand or couldn't answer. This was symbolic participation, but at least they made an attempt. In fact this new way of doing business in the country has set a precedent, we hope, for other sectors. The way is still not easy, but attitudes are changing.

Now, the debate is much more open, partly engendered by the World Bank's recent cancellation of credits and proposed loans to Bangladesh. The Asian Development Bank is beginning to think along the same lines, indicating that it may cancel 16 projects. The donors are saying, "Look, we're not going to support you in building unsustainable projects. You've got to face up to the fact you're in the twentieth century."

The donors' views have changed too. Out of 11 donors at the local consultative group meeting at the end of the third conference, public participation accountability was raised by 82 percent of them as the major problem, followed by environmental and social soundness. So, the whole of the donor agenda is focusing more on sustainable development because of the pressure exerted under the banner of the Flood Action Plan.

Refusing to Give In on Participation. The message for USAID is that it's a long and painful process to argue something consistently for five years. At times, there was a feeling in Bangladesh that USAID would give in.

The ISPAN project was single-minded about arguing for transparency and openness. In 1982 we decided that if we were arguing for transparency, we had to be transparent ourselves, if we had meetings, we would circulate minutes of those meetings, because that's what we were telling others to do. So we published a newsletter containing minutes of meetings. This got us into trouble with the USAID mission. They felt that it wasn't "quite the normal or done thing." And, of course, the mission got flak from the government of Bangladesh about sharing what they thought was confidential information publicly. The mission felt that some future projects might suffer but decided not to clamp down on us.

Fortunately for ISPAN, in the meantime, the local NGOs produced a newsletter, which meant we didn't really need to produce our newsletter anymore. Then the Flood-Plan Coordinating Organization in turn began producing a monthly newsletter describing what was happening in each of the 26 projects. Finally they gave in and became more transparent themselves.

A Gradual Dawn *Gene Brantly*

When Diane first contacted me about this presentation, she said that she was thinking of calling this session "Techies See the Light." Apparently she got a storm of e-mail saying, "Don't be pejorative about scientists or techies." Actually I thought the comment fit me, so I entitled my presentation "A Gradual Dawn." This techie did begin to see the light gradually over a period of time, and I'm now working hard to build a participatory approach to conducting health-risk assessments in developing countries.

Risk Assessment As a Discipline. Risk assessment attempts to predict the future health consequences of people's exposure to harmful environmental conditions. The method was developed primarily for use in the United States to predict the impact of exposure to environmental pollutants on cancer rates. To regulate pollutants intelligently, we need a way of estimating the long-term public-health consequences of exposure to those pollutants. All pollutants cannot be totally eliminated, but we can bring them down to a level of acceptable risk.

Within the last 20 years, health-risk assessment has come into its own as a discipline for environmental protection. As used in the United States, risk assessment is a data-intensive process, requiring a lot of information on ambient concentrations of pollutants, "transport-and-fate" models to predict ambient concentrations if we don't have actual measurements, "dose-response" models to predict the health effect of a particular dose, and so on. The process was developed primarily by toxicologists, but epidemiologists, ecologists, and other specialists are also in the picture.

Risk assessment is used first to decide whether or not to control a particular pollutant and second to set standards for reducing the levels of pollutants we wish to control. In "comparative" risk assessment, the attempt is to estimate and compare the risks attributable to a number of pollutants and to set priorities about which should be targets for control.

Setting the Scene. USAID's Office of Health and Nutrition wants to use risk assessment in developing countries. But to do so lots of issues have to be addressed, one of which is the lack of data. USAID, through the Water and Sanitation for Health (WASH) Project, decided to carry out a risk assessment in Quito because a fairly substantial amount of information was available and USAID's partners in Ecuador were interested in doing a study.

A risk assessment team would typically consist of a toxicologist, a specialist in environmental monitoring to collect the data, and an epidemiologist. A colleague of mine on the WASH Project, May Yacoob, a medical anthropologist experienced in community participation, kept telling me during our talks on how to structure this kind of investigation for a developing country, "You've got to put a social scientist on the team." I said, "What will a social scientist do? Just give me the environmental data, data on concentrations, and I will predict everything else. I don't need to talk to people, I just need to have the numbers." She told me that one of the things a social scientist could do would be to talk to people in the community about what they think is a risk or problem in the environment. I said, "I don't trust that information. What they <u>think</u> the problem is is not necessarily what it <u>really</u> is." I felt that getting people's impressions of their exposures and risks was not rigorous, and I did not want to be asked to estimate risks on the basis of somebody's opinion. That was professionally embarrassing to me.

May finally convinced me that the information that a social scientist could obtain might at least provide a context for the information that would be obtained using what I consider to be more rigorous methods. After thinking about that for a while, I came up with some other uses of interview information. For example, we have standard assumptions on people's dietary intake for populations in the United States, but we don't have such assumptions for other populations. Interviews could tell us what the composition of their diet is.

After about six months of arguing back and forth, finally I said, "Okay, May. As a matter of faith, I will do this. I'll take the step based primarily on professional faith in our status as colleagues." So we hired Linda Whiteford, a medical anthropologist from the University of South Florida, to participate on the risk assessment team.

How It Worked Out. Once in Ecuador, Linda collected a lot of original data, more than the rest of the team, who relied primarily on information that was already available. Linda organized a series of focus groups in the communities, she observed people's behavior and exposures directly, primarily around food and activities in the household, and she conducted a series of individual interviews. Her activities yielded qualitative information on people's exposures and health impacts. The people that she interviewed could not necessarily draw a linkage between cause and effect, but they provided information that didn't show up in the public health records: high rates of upper respiratory infections and relatively high rates of diarrheal disease.

Some of the qualitative information that Linda brought back was used directly in the risk analysis. She and her local colleagues discovered that, because of poor sanitation in the markets, women who were working in the markets were suffering from very high rates of urinary infections. We weren't even looking for that information, and it wouldn't have shown up in public health records. Even if it had, it wouldn't have been attributed to the lack of sanitation. She also found that there was a very high rate of injuries in the construction trades. This was not a surprise, but it did not show up in official statistics. No information on occupational health was available from official sources.

The interview information also provided a context to help us interpret other information that we collected. We found, in part through official statistics, in part through this qualitative information, that there was a reasonably high rate of diarrheal disease. Yet water supply in Quito is in very good condition and sanitation is reasonable in most of the city. But the interviews revealed that poor sanitation in the markets and at home in food preparation looked like an explanation for the diarrheal disease rates. More epidemiological work is necessary to verify that link, but at least it is plausible.

The process was successful largely because of the individuals who were involved. Linda was experienced in working with people in "more technical" professions, particularly engineers. She was assertive and self-confident, articulate about the value of her discipline, unshaken by the fact that a lot of the other people on the team had never worked with an anthropologist, and persistent and patient. She kept putting the information out there until the other team members saw the value of it. At the same time, the other team members weren't ogres. They gradually recognized the value of the qualitative input. Also, during the team planning meeting, we made sure that individuals on the team had a basis for collaboration and appreciated each other's disciplines. We had prepared the team to work together.

Community-Based Environmental Management. Looking forward, the next step in building a truly participatory risk assessment is getting the community to participate more actively than just being interviewed. Since the Quito assessment, May and I have put together a model for community-based environmental management. (It's described in WASH Technical Report No. 90, available from the Environmental Health Project.) It is a model for involving community organizations and community members in all phases of environmental management, starting with identifying and assessing the magnitude of problems and continuing through setting priorities, developing and implementing solutions, and monitoring the results. The model includes training in technical subjects and group process work and involves working with an NGO to establish a repository for the skills that are necessary to continue the process. We're now in the process of finding opportunities to test this model.

When I started working with USAID two years ago, the notion that communities could participate in the risk assessment process was not on my screen. It moved onto my screen only because of the persistent efforts of a colleague. The baby step that we took in Quito worked out well and was enough to convince me to try to build a broader model for public participation in environmental management.

Discussion Session

Is Participation Granted or Won?

Glen Prickett: As moderator I would like to ask if participation comes about through donors and government conceding it or through the participants demanding it and creating it? My own answer to this question is based on my experience working for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an NGO that was

often considered irritating by the U.S. government and others. One of our main purposes was to help environmental and other NGOs in developing countries attain technical knowledge and political space so that they could participate in the policymaking processes. One of the best experiences we had was with an environmental NGO in Sri Lanka, which came to us with concerns about the government's proposal to build a 900-megawatt, coal-fired power plant in the Trincomalee harbor. The world's fifth largest natural harbor, it's a great site for a power plant because it's so cheap to bring in coal. The environmentalists were concerned about the impact of thermal pollution on the fish and acid deposition on the tea estate in Sri Lanka, both highly complicated technical questions. We were able to provide them with some assistance in sorting through the technical matters. But, getting to the question I posed, that NGO had already created the forum for participation a few years before when it had lobbied for a law that required the government to carry out an environmental impact assessment and prevented the director of coast conservation from approving the project before the assessment was completed and the public had had an opportunity to comment on it. I could give other examples in which donors, including USAID and the multilateral development banks, have tried to impose participatory requirements in similar situations without nearly the same effective conclusion.

Can the Public Acquire Enough Technical Knowledge To Participate?

Glen Prickett: In my professional experience the most difficult challenge is how groups like the NGO in Sri Lanka acquire the technical knowledge to participate effectively and rationally. When you open up highly technical decision-making processes to public participation and you don't start with an equal basis of technical knowledge and capability, bad science or allegations of bad science can ensue.

Nena Vreeland: This question is not peculiar to developing countries. I live in Montgomery County, where one community recently went through a free-for-all with the National Institutes of Health regarding the building of a disposal system. Clearly the community was not totally knowledgeable about the technical issues, and yet they managed to line up resources to make a cogent argument, and NIH apparently backed down. According to my local paper, the persistence of the community, non-knowledgeable though they might have been, forced the ball into NIH's court. NIH had to prove something in a way that was understandable to the community.

Hiram Larew: At the intersection between participation and technology, the core of the issue is the expert versus the public. In the United States, we are in awe of experts. I'm not certain that that's necessarily wise. Is there a similar sort of awe in developing countries, or is there kind of a refreshing willingness to question experts from the outset?

Glen Prickett: In the Sri Lanka case I worked on, our local partner NGO was fond of referring to the engineers in the Ceylon Electricity Board as the "lords of power." They were extremely competent technically. There was a mystique about them.

Keith Pittman: In Bangladesh, and also in India, there's a tremendous gulf between the professional and the normal person. The normal person in Bangladesh has four years of education and is in awe of the professionals who represent power. Sadly, most of the debate of the Flood Action Plan took place among the intellectuals in the community, who represent about half of one percent of the population. True public participation will be very difficult to achieve and will be very long term.

Anthropology Is a Science

Diane Russell: Anthropology *is* a science, and part of the science of anthropology is understanding local knowledge systems. When local knowledge systems are incorporated with more traditionally scientific views, the result is a much better understanding of local systems. I'm particularly knowledgeable about local resource management systems. Farmers have taught me about local resources and how to use

them in a much more detailed and knowledgeable way than extension agents and scientists who don't understand the local system.

Outside Pressure for Participation

Molly Kux: In Bangladesh a number of events made things happen which people were having a difficult time getting done. The elections were one such event. They made the government much more responsive to the idea of public participation. It would also be interesting to know how the government assesses the impact of the pressure donors exert for public participation.

Keith Pittman: Ironically, the election also had a negative effect. Before President Ershad stepped down, he tried to develop decentralized planning. Therefore, one of the first acts of the new democratic government was, in fact, to react by repealing that system of local administration. For the last two years there has been virtually no local government. Therefore, one of the problems we have is that there's no mechanism for projects to be carried out at the local level. So there are flaws that go with democracy as well as with dictatorship.

In Bangladesh the NGOs have been strengthened a lot by the freedom to publish and disseminate results. Five years ago, it was very difficult to publish anything. The newspapers weren't as free as they are now. Journalists weren't particularly well trained. Now there are a few programs to upgrade the environmental awareness of journalists so that they at least understand what the issues are. The quantum leap in information has led to reforms.

Things look quite good, but we still have a long way to go. In fact, there is a feeling in government that participation has gone too far. Last week one of the secretaries of government stated that donors had dual standards: "You have power groups and power lobbies in your countries. Think about in the West, for example, the cattle ranching and the forestry interests. Why can't we have the same interests? And yet you tell us we can't. You have a double standard."

Education for Participation

George _____: This is a question for Keith. If you had X amount of dollars now, thinking about the sustainability of the participation process that is beginning to unfold in Bangladesh, how much of it would you put into trying to reeducate the thousands of engineers who are in the system and are going to be in the system for the foreseeable future, and how much would you put on the NGO and local level?

Keith Pittman: I would put the money into local government, because grassroots development needs a local government structure to make it work.

Then I think one might talk about education. The people at the top in the technical careers are well educated, and most are intelligent enough to change. One can accelerate that change. But education also is necessary for the project beneficiaries so that they won't for example, cut embankments, thinking that will improve things. Public information programs on television, for example, would raise an awareness of rights and responsibilities in terms of the landscape and the environment.

Notes from the E-mail Bag

This session of the Participation Forum prompted a number of fairly long e-mail offerings. Most are summarized, with a few interspersed excerpts. In addition, we owe many thanks to Dana Fischer, Maria Beebe, and George Carner, who sent along papers and cables reporting project experiences involving participation. We look forward to circulating such material once mechanisms for collecting and disseminating "best practices" are up and running.

Mari Clark voiced her agreement with the points made by the two main speakers in the sixth forum and with Diane Russell's comment that anthropology is a science that can help us to understand the world just as other (more quantitative) sciences can. "An anthropologist's skill...provides essential information to assess the appropriateness of technology transfers based on 'modern science' and a basis to communicate the transfer in terms that make sense." She cites a number of examples: understanding traditional patterns of property ownership can reduce conflicts over land and forest development and land reform; understanding gender roles important for grassroots organization efforts in any sector. "Too often," she wrote, "the human dimension is ignored, viewed as unimportant or at best included as a social-impact assessment appendix of a project design."

Joseph F. Stepanek sent a brief message pointing out that in his opinion Keith Pittman should have mentioned the "thirty-plus years of World Bank support for top-down massive engineering works" in his discussion of the reasons for the failure of the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan.

Michael Calavan sent some notes he had taken at one of a number of meetings organized by NGOs in Bangladesh to review the National Environmental Master Action Plan (NEMAP). This plan was prepared in a conventional way by an international consulting firm in conjunction with a few ministries. "Near the end of the exercise," he wrote, "someone decided to make it more 'participatory' by sending the draft final report to some NGOs for their comment." At the review meeting, the NGOs said that they were there to talk about the process, not the substance of the exercise. "After much negotiation, the outcome was that the NGOs (coordinated by staff of their national paramount organization) are running a massive national exercise -- 24 local meetings (each 2 days) around the country, a series of sectoral meetings, and a culminating national meeting with a broad range of public/private, urban/rural, professional/villager participants. ... The NGOs are largely financing the effort on their own." An excerpt from Calavan's notes of the meeting :

> Attendees worked most of the two days in the five groups (each...with about 10-12 members). I think ... that four of the groups are mixed, including farmers, housewives, artisans, teachers, etc. Then there is a fifth group of ''intellectuals," isolated to some degree, since it meets upstairs, when the other groups meet downstairs and close to each other. ...The "intellectuals" consist of senior local bureaucrats and elected leaders. People noted ruefully that it was the intellectual group that had the hardest time wrapping up its work and agreeing on points they would make in the afternoon session.

Jean Meadowcroft urged that we "change our orientation from development being something 'done to people,' to something we carry out together." She believes that the lack of communication ability -- especially learning to listen -- causes many project difficulties. "As Americans, we have a can-do, let's-get-on-with-it orientation. We talk too fast and listen too little, while in some cultures local people, including government, are reluctant to express themselves directly or quickly."

Nena Vreeland's message addressed an issue Joe Lombardo raised in the e-mail section of the third Participation Forum. He said: "Participation...negates the blueprint approach to development programs. To the extent we posit specific sectoral outcomes, we will find ourselves manipulating participation to gain support for our program." Vreeland responded by saying that, while it is crucial to build capacity, USAID should not necessarily abandon objectives defined in "sector" terms. Her reasons, briefly, are (1) institution-building risks becoming an end in itself, (2) commitment and action are motivated not by a vision of improved capacity but of ultimate improvements, (3) genuine participation (which is closely related to capacity-building) has to be continually nurtured to be sustained, and (4) because Westerners might not recognize capacity in a specific host-country setting, they should define objectives as real improvements. She concluded by saying, "I define USAID's role in development as that of a coach: bringing possibility to people for whom possibility did not previously exist."

Diane LaVoy continued the debate by stating that, while she shares Vreeland's negative reaction to misguided efforts in capacity-building, "I'm talking," she goes on, "about a ...view of the development process, in which we...ask what are the factors that prevent the society from being able to ...work more effectively to address its problems? " Once those factors have been identified, then USAID, in collaboration with host-country actors, defines strategic objectives that address those factors. Defining its fundamental objectives this way would prevent USAID from focusing on the "evanescent 'targets'" of the Belize health project described in the June forum.

Nena Vreeland responded in a second message by saying that she has been critical all along of the "largely internal and unilateral strategic planning process of USAID," which in her opinion was in line with USAID's predominant culture at the time it was instituted.. "Genuine participation basically requires the participants to 'yield' complete control over decisions about what the issues are -- this is very difficult for folks to do when they 'know' they are right!"

Margaret Bonner told how participation has been worked into the development of USAID's agricultural strategy in Ethiopia. Studies prepared as part of a structured approach to developing the strategy have their scopes of work "aired" with government, other donors, and NGOs. When the teams that will carry out the studies arrive, USAID hosts a what-advice-do-you-have session with the same three groups, and representatives from those groups participate directly in the studies. The study teams debrief these groups before departing and get input for the final draft study. "By the time the final report comes out, there has been active participation by those involved ... and hopefully it becomes a document which does not just form the basis for our strategy but which becomes part of the economic planning for the country as a whole."

Stuart Callison expressed great pleasure that "USAID/W management is finally coming around" to view development as a participatory process. He cited the recommendations of a "Sustainability Working Group" that he co-chaired in 1990:

Missions should:

* work closely with host-country leaders on Country Development Strategy Statements,

* include key host-country actors in mission project and program planning at very early stages,

* actively strengthen host-country capacity to do its own strategic planning,

* strengthen and use local management systems wherever possible in project design and implementation, and

* monitor and report on the success of collaborative strategic planning, institutional reform, and host-country provision of recurrent costs."

Christopher Timura described a system of indigenous mapping used in the Darien region of Panama and the Mosquitia region of Honduras. It is a low-tech cartographic technique that can be an alternative to a GIS system or used in conjunction with GIS. As its name suggests, indigenous mapping promotes participation; it was used to gain more understanding of the relationship of indigenous populations to the land than higher-tech methods might provide. The surveyors were selected for their knowledge of the area and were encouraged to use whatever mapping style made sense to them. Through a series of workshops, the information they collected was collated under the supervision of professional cartographers to form a composite map, which was judged by Panamanian cartographers to be the most accurate and detailed available. Timura's message ends with an assessment of this mapping methodology: "The mapping process...could act as a catalyst for local populations. With a solid base of cartographic and demographic information, and strengthened lines of communication between members of the local populations, government and NGOs, as well as members of the local populations themselves, each party will be better equipped to assess emerging issues and generate solutions to development problems."